Stendhal (Henri Beyle) to Madame Dembowski

Stendhal's *De L'Amour* (1822) is an original and provocative exploration of love. It is especially pointed on the hopelessness and folly of passion, a subject on which the novelist was an expert. He had an affair with the stunning Pietragrua, who proved to be faithless; he fell hopelessly in love with Madame Métilde Dembowski, who was unin-

terested in a serious relationship with him. There were other loves of less magnitude but hardly more satisfaction, and he wove all of them into *De L'Amour*, which attempts to explain not only the psychology of love but its political and social meaning.

Stendhal's two masterpieces, *The Red and the Black* (1830) and *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), are both political novels recounting life in early-nineteenth-century Europe. Both are written with a remarkable vitality and power. As this letter to Madame Dembowski suggests, Stendhal was not a man to live life halfway. He threw himself into his writing and into his love with full force and often suffered for that commitment. His work was condemned as sensational, scandalous, immoral, irreligious, and subversive. His ardent love was never fully reciprocated. "The heart which blazes with the flames of a volcano," he wrote in one of his letters to Madame Dembowski, "cannot please the object of its adoration; it commits follies, fails in delicacy, and burns itself away."

Varese, the 7th of June 1819

Madame,

You throw me into despair. You repeatedly accuse me of failing in delicacy—as if, on your lips, this accusation were nothing. Who would have thought, when I parted from you at Milan, that the first letter you wrote to me would begin with "monsieur", or that you would accuse me of failing in delicacy?

Ah, madame, it is easy for a man who has no passion to conduct himself always with moderation and prudence. I, too, when I can hearken to my own counsel, I believe that I am not lacking in discretion. But I am dominated by a fatal passion that leaves me no longer master of my actions. I had sworn to myself to take coach, or at least not to see you, and not to write to you until you returned: a force more powerful than all my resolutions dragged me to the places where you were. I perceive all too well that henceforth this passion is to be the great concern of my life. All interests, all considerations have paled before it. This fatal need I have of seeing you carries me away, dominates me, transports me. There are moments, in the long, solitary evenings, when, if it were necessary to

commit a murder that I might see you, I would become a murderer.

In all my life I have had only three passions: ambition, from 1800–1811; love of a woman who deceived me, from 1811 to 1818; and, during the past year, this passion that dominates me and ceaselessly grows. At all seasons and amidst all distractions, anything unrelated to my passion has meant nothing to me: whether happy or unhappy, it has occupied every moment. And do you suppose that the sacrifice I have made to your conventions, of not seeing you this evening, is a little thing? Assuredly, I do not wish to make a merit of it: I present it to you only as an expiation of the wrongs of which I may have been guilty two days [a]go. This expiation means nothing to you, madame: but for me, who have spent so many frightful evenings deprived of you and without seeing you, it is a sacrifice more difficult to endure than the most horrible tortures; it is a sacrifice which, in the extreme pain of the victim, is worthy of the sublime woman to whom it is offered.

In the midst of the confusion of my whole being, into which I am thrown by the imperious necessity of seeing you, there is nevertheless one quality which I have preserved, and which I pray that destiny will continue to preserve for me, unless it seeks to plunge me, in my own esteem, into the underworld of abjection—the quality of perfect truthfulness. You tell me, madame, that I so greatly "compromised" matters on Saturday morning, that in the evening it was necessary for you to act as you did. It is the word "compromised" that wounds me to the bottom of my soul; and, if I had the good fortune to be able to pluck out the fatal affection that pierces my heart, it would be this word "compromised" that gave me the strength to do so.

But no, madame, your soul has too much nobility not to have understood mine. You were offended, and you used the first word that came to the end of your pen. I shall accept as judge, between your accusation and myself, a person whose evidence you will not reject. If Madame Dembowski, if the noble and sublime Métilde, *believes* that my conduct of Saturday morning was the least in the world *calculated* to

force her, out of a just care for her reputation in this country, to take some further step, then I confess that this infamous conduct was mine, that there is a being in the world who can say that I fail in delicacy. I shall go further: I have never had any talent for seduction except in respect of women whom I did not love at all. As soon as I am in love I become timid—as you can judge from the manner in which I am always out of countenance in your presence.

If I had not started prattling on Saturday evening, everybody, even including the good padre Rettore, would have perceived that I was in love. But even if I had had a talent for seduction, I would not have employed it upon you. If success depended only upon the making of vows, I would still wish to win you for myself, and not for another being whom I had set up in my place. I would blush, I would have no more happiness, I think, even though you loved me, if I could suspect that you loved a being who was not myself. If you had faults, I could say that I did not see them: I would say, and say in truth, that I adored them: and, indeed, I can say I adore that extreme susceptibility which causes me to spend such horrible nights. It is thus that I would wish to be loved, it is thus that true love is created: it rejects in horror the idea of seduction, as a means unworthy of it, and, together with seduction, it rejects every calculation, every strategem—including the least thought of "compromising" the beloved object in order to force her to certain further steps to its own advantage.

Had I the talent to seduce you—and I do not believe that such a talent exists—I would not use it. Sooner or later you would perceive that you had been deceived; and to lose you after having possessed you would be still more frightful, I think, than if heaven had condemned me to die without ever having been loved by you.

When a being is dominated by an extreme passion, all that he says or does in a particular situation proves nothing concerning him: what bears witness for him is the entirety of his life. Thus, madame, were I to vow all day long at your feet that I loved you, or that I hated you, this should have no

influence upon the degree of credence that you decided to grant me. It is the entirety of my life that should speak. Now, although I am very little known, and still less interesting to the people who know me, yet you might enquire—for lack of another topic of conversation—whether I am known to lack either pride or constancy.

I have now been in Milan for five years. Let us assume that all that is said about my previous life is false. Five years—from the age of thirty-one to the age of thirty-six—are a fairly important interval in a man's life, especially when during these five years he has been tested by difficult circumstances. If ever you deign, madame—for lack of a better occupation—to think about my character, then deign to compare these five years of my life with five years taken from the life of any other individual. You will find lives much more brilliantly talented, lives much more fortunate: but that you will find a life more full of honour and constancy than mine, this I do not believe. How many mistresses had I in Milan, in five years? How many times have I weakened on a point of honour? Well, I would have disgracefully failed in honour if, in my relations with a being who cannot make me draw my sword, I had in the least sought to "compromise" her.

Love me if you will, divine Métilde, but in God's name do not despise me. Such torment is beyond my strength to endure. In your manner of thinking, which is very just, if you despised me it would be impossible for you ever to love me.

With a soul as lofty as yours, what surer way could there be of earning your displeasure than that which you accuse me of having taken? I so much fear to displease you that the moment when I first saw you, on the evening of the 3rd—the moment which should have been the sweetest of my life—was, on the contrary, one of my most wretched, by reason of the fear I had of displeasing you.

Stendhal (Henri Beyle) to Comtesse Clementine Curial

Love letters are virtually the only "public" space in which it is permissible for us to explore our deepest self, excavate our feelings, and express our most private emotions. Writing such letters, we often come to appreciate our own complexities and understand that the real purpose of writing letters is to fall a little bit in love with our self. In this process, the actual Beloved is mostly an innocent bystander.

Nowhere is this more apparent (comically so) than in the "Dear John" letter that Stendhal wrote to himself on June 24, 1824. Dissatisfied with his lover's reticence, he penned a "My dear Henri" letter that does everything that the perfect Dear John should do: it takes the blame for the end of love, it praises the Beloved, it promises tender interest until the end of one's life, it hints that the Beloved was the best thing that ever happened to one, it offers (of course!) friendship. Ah, yes, friendship. If love is self-love, the function of a Dear John is to help the Beloved preserve self-love even after the magic potion of passion has been withdrawn.

Had Stendhal really believed his passionate affair with Comtesse Clementine Curial was over, he never could have written such a letter. This letter borders on parody with its formulaic presentation of all of the requisite features of a Dear John. (No one who has ever been decimated by a Dear John/Dear Jane has paused to consider the letter's generic requirements.) Stendhal's affair with Comtesse Curial lasted another two years. When it did end, there was no room for humor.

Clementine Curial was married to a cruel and abusive man fourteen years her senior when she met Stendhal in 1824. They fell almost immediately and passionately into love, so much so that they forgot all caution. Once, she even hid him in her cellar for several days in order that they could be together whenever her jealous husband left the house. She was consumed by love for Stendhal, yet unable to leave her husband. She was a mother at a time when law allowed a father full control over his children, especially in the case of separation or divorce. Torn between desire and the reality of her situation, Curial

attempted suicide in 1826. When that failed, she made a final break from Stendhal, unable to continue a love that brought so much pain.

The real end of the relationship (unlike this feigned Dear John) left Stendhal in a depression that felt like living death. He recovered, true to form, by writing. In *Promenades dans Rome* he was able to reminisce about happier times spent in Italy and soothe himself with the tame pleasures of research. Carefully, even tenderly, he wrote himself into life and self-love once more.

Paris, the 24th of June 1824, at noon

You can have no notion of the black thoughts into which your silence has plunged me. I was thinking that yesterday night, when you were packing, you might have found the time to write me three lines, which you could have put into the box at Laon. When no letter came yesterday, I hoped for one this morning. "Whilst changing horses at S_____," I said to myself, "she will have asked for a sheet of paper." But no: occupied solely with her daughter, she forgets the being who can no longer think of anything but her!

As I pondered at my desk, with the shutters closed, my black grief found entertainment in composing the following letter which you will perhaps write to me before long—for, after all, what would it cost you to write me a few words? Here, then, is the letter which I shall have the sorrow to read:

"My dear Henri, you exacted from me a promise to be sincere. This opening to my letter already enables you to foretell what remains to be said. Do not take it too greatly to heart, my dear friend. Bear in mind that, in default of keener sentiments, I shall always be bound to you by the sincerest friendship, and shall always take the tenderest interest in whatever may befall you. You realise, my dear friend, from the tone of this letter that a very sincere trust in you has taken that place in my heart which was formerly occupied by feelings of another sort. I like to believe that this trust will be justified, and that I shall never have to repent what I have been to you.

"Farewell, my dear friend, let us both be reasonable.

Accept the friendship, the tender friendship, that I offer you, and do not fail to come and see me when I return to Paris.

"Farewell, my friend . . ."